

Defining a tri-dimensional role for leadership in further education colleges

Steve Lambert

Centre for Education Studies, University of Hull, UK

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Abstract

This article presents a review of current leadership practices of principals in further education colleges and suggests that principalship is more than a two-dimensional functional model comprising internal or externally focused activities. During the past 20 years further education leadership has become more demanding, with greater accountability imposed by a state-controlled system and, as Hargreaves and Fink (2005) suggest, this has impacted on the number of individuals entering senior leadership posts. In light of these changes it is appropriate to review the role of the principal and what is known about the way the role has changed. As a result of the way in which principalship has evolved, this article introduces a tri-dimensional model of principalship – first by reflecting on leadership practices of college principals and identifying the key elements of their role, and second by suggesting that college principalship compasses three theoretical aspects: a public, an internal–public and an internal–private.

Keywords

colleges, further education, leadership, principals, role

Introduction

Leadership in further education has changed over the past 20 years from local authority managed to one of institutional autonomy, reflecting shifts in state policy and ideology (Ball, 2009). As a result of colleges' new found autonomy, external pressures such as the need to understand the complexities of a nationally imposed funding methodology, and increases in inspection and audit, Harper (2000) suggested that specialist managers such as directors of finance, quality and performance were needed to lead institutions in this new environment. Randle and Brandy (1997) observe that as a consequence of the external demands on colleges a new form of manager has emerged within further education with managerial values that differ from those of academic staff. Elliot (1996) calls this dichotomy a clash between 'student centred pedagogic culture' and 'the managerialism culture of managers'. This is supported by Wilkinson (2007), who suggests that the introduction of managerial practices and ideologies into education has eroded the influences and power of the educational professional and that it is these practices that will potentially undermine the purpose of education.

It is this dichotomy that has required the role of the principal to evolve in order to respond to the competing academic and business requirements. At the same time, Frearson (2003), Clancy (2005) and Collinson and Collinson (2006) all argue that there is a chronic shortage of suitability experienced candidates pursuing principalship – a situation, Frearson (2003) suggests, made worse by an aging workforce amongst currently serving principals. Hargreaves and Fink

(2005) propose that this shortage is a result of the principal's role becoming increasingly complex and demanding, owing to changing student expectations and increased financial constraints. As a result of state policy and the application of free-market principles, colleges were facing significant increases in state-led regulation and having to adopt managerial principles more commonly found in the private sector. This has resulted in college leadership focusing on financial control, efficiencies, delivering more with the same or less funding (Gravatt, 2010), and the creation of a flexible workforce able to respond to consumer demand (Morrison, 2006).

In 2009 KPMG surveyed college principals on the changes in the role since incorporation out of local authority control (KPMG, 2009). The report found principals had evolved to be on a par with chief executives of multi-million pound businesses with some colleges operating a series of subsidiary companies too. Collinson (2009) confirmed that the operating environment for further education leadership had become increasingly complex, with multiple and, at times, competing pressures. However, some participants in Collinson's (2009) study felt that at times they were operating as branch managers within a national organization.

This article uses the findings of interviews to determine the different aspects of the principal's role and contributes

Corresponding author:

Centre for Education Studies, Steve Lambert, University of Hull,
Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX, UK.
E-mail: s.lambert@2007.hull.ac.uk

to the understanding of how the role has evolved and responded to the challenges faced by the changing operating environment. Furthermore, Lumby and Tomlinson (2000) state that much more research is needed on leadership experiences in further education.

Method

Extant research on educational leadership employs a descriptive, qualitative design with semi-structured interviews with key informants (Austen et al., 2012). This study conforms to this trend and, based on the assumption that principals were a primary target, by staff, for disapproval of their management values and actions (Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000), this article explores the differing dimensions and perceptions of principalship. The article reports on interviews with six principals of colleges in the south of England conducted during 2010. This is 18 years after colleges were incorporated out of local authority control and after Kennedy (1997) had highlighted concerns around further education management and Goddard-Patel and Whitehead's (2000) review of failing further education colleges.

Five of the six principals participating in this study came through an academic route, commencing their careers as teachers, progressing on to head of department, faculty, then assistant or deputy principal prior to gaining principalship. One participant was from a finance background, having been appointed as a deputy principal responsible for finance and resources. Two of the five participants who started as teachers did so through teaching in the compulsory sector, and the other three were further education teacher-trained. Three of the principals were experienced, having held principalship posts for a number of years, while three were newly appointed, having been in post for less than 1 year. The principals participating in the study were from colleges categorized as either medium or large, using Payne's (2008) classification by income. All interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed for common themes.

The interviews produced a significant insight into the various aspects of leadership, the development of future leaders and the highs and lows of being a college principal. This article therefore focuses on the predominant themes arising from the interviews.

Defining the multiple roles of the principal

Green (2000) suggests three elements to the role – academic leader, manager and administrator – and all the activities undertaken by the principal can be categorized under one of these three headings. Sala (2003), however, suggests that the role of the principal can be considered under the heading of professional adviser to the corporation, management, accounting officer and public relations. Leithwood et al. (2004) suggest that there are three key aspects to the role of the principal: developing people, setting organizational vision and creating an effective organization; however, Davis et al. (2005) argue that there is more to the role than this, saying that principals should also focus on supporting teachers and developing the curriculum.

All of the aforementioned commentators appear to categorize principalship as functional activities, and while there is no doubt that a majority of a principal's work can be classified under a heading, indeed it is possible to attribute most activities undertaken by a principal into a category. For example, setting the annual budget could be classed as administrative using Green's (2000) definition, part of Sala's (2003) accounting officer function, or using Leithwood et al.'s (2004) classification of creating an effective organization. Neither of the aforementioned studies considers the principal's perception of principalship, nor do they consider the views of those managers who aspire to be principals one day.

The public role of the principal

As a result of autonomy created through incorporation and the development of a market-led environment in which colleges now find themselves operating, the outward facing role of the principal has no doubt become more prominent. As the figureheads of the institutions, principals find themselves representing the interests of the college within the local community, to businesses and, for a minority, regionally and nationally. However, as principal D commented, there is a misconception that if you are a principal who is active locally or nationally that you can 'change the world'; instead it is more about timing and knowing what others are interested in. Principal D further suggested that courting representatives external to the college is like engaging in a marketing campaign with the principal promoting the services, courses or ideologies of the college.

In the evolving role that has seen principals combine the worlds of academia and business, principal A acknowledges that 'principals have had to become business people' and, as a result of the then further education minister John Hayes' announcement in 2011 to reduce the level of state-imposed regulation on colleges, principal A suggests that the relaxations in some of the policies previously in place has 'made the job scarier'. With perceived autonomy comes an increased level of risk, as there are fewer safety nets in place if colleges get into difficulties. This was witnessed by Goddard-Patel and Whitehead (2000), whose studies focused on why colleges fail.

As a consequence of the increases in autonomy that colleges now have, the external public role in which principals have to engage, either promoting the interests of the college or possibly defending the college as a result of potentially negative publicity, is critical. Aside from the importance of the public aspect of the post, it is equally important that principals have the necessary communications and, where appropriate, media skills to be able to engage externally in a manner that best represents the values of the college.

Internal leadership

As well as the public role, principals also have an internal role where they are visible to staff and students who see them as the academic leader and custodians of academic

standards who challenge mediocrity, as well as the business leader responsible for securing the financial stability and viability of the college.

Nevertheless, this internal role also has a public facet, which this article proposes to call the *internal–public* element. This function, identified by principals, includes, as already mentioned, leading the college both academically as well as in business, but also engaging with staff and students and dealing with issues affecting both groups. Principal B summarized the internal role as ‘ensuring the long term future of the college; if they’re staff, ensuring security of their jobs; if they’re students, ensuring that the college gives them a good deal’. Principal A added that there was also a ceremonial function that the principal plays, which included presentation of certificates at award ceremonies and graduations, where the principal has to step into the perceived persona of the academic leader.

It is this internal–public element that is often considered by staff as purely the internal function of being a principal (Lambert, 2012), and when considering these internal–public aspects of the role they all conform to Green’s (2000) description of being either managerial, administrative or of academic leadership in nature.

Apart from the internal–public role there is another aspect to principalship which could be called the *internal–private* element. This is the private role that the principal has, where they are the strategic thinker, working closely with their deputies and the governors to develop the vision and mission of the organization jointly, but also where they synthesize government policy and translate it into strategic plans for the college. It is this internal–private element that is often hidden from all but a few staff and, as principal A puts it, ‘staff don’t see the headspace, the thinking time and space which you need’. Principal B suggested that they need that private space to be a reflective leader, where they could step back from a situation, reflect and often undo something that has not gone to plan, such as a member of staff getting it wrong with a parent or a student or having made a ‘silly’ purchase.

Principals participating in this research all subscribe to the idea of having the private time and space to think, and with Davis et al. (2005) suggesting that there is an expectation that they are visionaries and innovators within their institutions while at the same time serving the complex and often competing needs of stakeholders, this can only be achieved if they have that private space in which to operate.

A challenge for principals is ensuring that there is a balance between these elements – if the balance is skewed in favour of the external aspects of the role, there is potential for principals to become disconnected from the college (Davis et al., 2005). If the balance is focused exclusively on the internal work of the college, the risk is that principals are perceived by external stakeholders as not engaging in the local community or being out of touch with the stakeholder demands, such as local authorities. However, as Green (2000) highlights, the elements are not equal and there will be periods of time when there is an imbalance as a result of changing environmental factors.

Conclusion

This snapshot view of six principals has presented evidence, which in part suggests that there are three dimensions to the role of the principal, and supports the managerialist idea that the role of the principal had shifted from academic leadership to managerial. This article has suggested that, rather than categorizing the work of the principal by functions (Davis et al., 2005; Green, 2000; Leithwood et al., 2004), it can be done under the headings of internal–public, internal–private and public. It could be suggested that it is a matter of interpretation as to which element specific functions are categorized under depending on the model that is being used. For example, the internal–private aspect of principalship could include aspects of the principal’s role previously categorized under Sala’s (2003) ‘professional advisor to the corporation’ or Leithwood et al.’s (2004) ‘setting organisational vision and mission’ function.

The challenge is not only to maintain an appropriate balance between the various elements pertaining to principalship, but also to ensure that there is not a polarization between academic and managerial beliefs resulting from the dual role of academic leader and chief executive that is held by the post-holder. Lumby and Tomlinson (2000) remind us that no one group has a monopoly of professionalism in further education, particularly if this is taken to mean primarily the commitment to students. However, as Randle and Brady (1997) note, there is an implicit assumption within the debate around managerialism in education that professional teachers and lecturers should retain control of teaching and learning, just as the medical professions do in the healthcare sector, because they are best placed to do so.

This article does not suggest that all the changes that have happened in further education have been in the best interests of students, or that senior managers always act with integrity and effectiveness. What this article does is argue that the role of principal has evolved significantly from that of chief academic officer to one that combines the academic responsibility with that of being the chief executive of a multimillion pound business. This has required new skills and a different way of looking at the activities and functions that are carried out by the post-holder.

What is needed is more research and debate on leadership in further education that tries to recognize and reach conclusions on the challenges facing senior leaders when operating in such a complex and constantly changing environment.

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